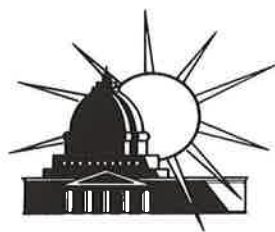


THE BRECHNER REPORT

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April 2012



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Encouraging disclosure of government information

In an ideal world, open government and disclosure of information would not be a chore.

Governments would make information available to citizens by putting information online in multiple formats and in searchable platforms.

Some governments take the initiative and clearly disclose data and information to citizens in a way that is both useful and easily understood. Others need some encouragement.

Sunshine Week, which takes place mid-March, is an annual celebration of transparency held to bring attention to open government.

To celebrate, Sunshine Review, a national nonprofit organization committed to state and local government transparency, awards Sunny Awards to recognize governments that make key information available to constituents online using

a 10 Point Transparency Checklist.

Governments earn a grade based upon the amount of checks that a

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By **Diana Lopez**

state or local government website earns and Sunshine Review gives Sunny Awards to governments that post online 9 or 10 of the items requested on the transparency checklist.

Sunshine Review's desire to encourage governments is one of the reasons that the 10-point checklist requires only the availability of key information instead of more extensive, detailed data. The goal of rating governments on information available online is ultimately more government information available online.

Proactive disclosure, or the idea that governments post information before citizens or laws ask them to do so, saves the trouble and resources that come with answering public records requests. These requests are a great tool, but ideally citizens do not have to ask for information because governments already provide it online.

In addition to the tax dollars saved, providing key information and data online allows citizens to hold government officials accountable and find waste and fraud, accidental and deliberate.



Diana Lopez

The reality, however, is that of the more than 6,000 governments rated since 2008, Sunshine Review has awarded only 365 Sunny Awards.

Why so few? Most governments fail to provide their citizens with basic, foundational information.

There is little satisfaction in noting that a government website lacks key information. There is great satisfaction, however, in working with a government to get as much information posted online as possible.

Through collaboration with governments, Sunshine Review has ensured the online availability of contracts with vendors, city and county budgets and information as straightforward as the contact information for elected officials.

Sometimes, governments have this information but don't think of making it available online until someone asks. Usually talk of open government refers to governments engaging citizens—however, citizens also need to work with governments.

Collaboration with the public is not always an approach governments take when it comes to transparency. There are times when governments act as adversaries and block access to public information.

In these cases, it is important for citizens and professionals, like journalists, to persist in demanding information. Citizens must reach out to Attorneys General and/or ethics commissions and threaten lawsuits.

The beauty of proactive disclosure is that governments are serving citizens and also beating them to the punch. When governments disclose information before someone specifically asks for it, there is no need for a struggle to get information.

Sunshine Review's Sunny Awards celebrate those open and transparent governments. May next year bring increased transparency and even more Sunny Awards.

Diana Lopez is Senior Editor of Sunshine Review. Lopez writes about state and local government transparency issues and investigates local governments through public records requests. For more information on the Sunny Awards, see http://sunshinereview.org/index.php/Sunny_Awards.